

## Childproofing Your Relationship

My name is Jacki Silber. I've been a Marriage and Family Therapist for about 15 years. Before that I worked in the counseling field for many years. I became interested in perinatal psychology almost 8 years ago when my daughter was born. We were incredibly lucky to be able to have a child but during the last trimester I became depressed and anxious. I did not get help for 8 months. I lost that valuable time with my daughter, was unable to feel my love for her, and truthfully don't really even remember that time. Currently I work with many types of client but a large number of them are either pregnant or parenting. I specialize in Postpartum Depression and Anxiety, parenting, and couples counseling for parents of young children. In addition I work with parents figuring out identity issues, how to balance work and family and how to be better parents than their parents were. I also work with families that have suffered the loss of a baby during pregnancy or shortly after birth.

The information on relationships I will be presenting is based in large part on John Gottman's research. I'm interested in Dr. Gottman's work for two reasons. He is one of the few people studying couples in the perinatal period. He also studies both couples that are doing well and couples whose marriage has been terribly affected by having a baby.

Unfortunately the statistics regarding how relationships are affected by having a child is extremely bleak. Due to people like Gottman and others we now know the factors that can assist couples to decrease the negative effects having a baby has on their relationships.

3.6 million babies are born in the United States every year. Most babies are born to couples. Sixty – seven percent of new parents state that they are less satisfied with their marriages and partners since having children. Only 33% of people remain content with their spouses after having a baby.

We know that during the perinatal period conflict and hostility increase. Emotional intimacy deteriorates. Couples become bewildered and exhausted and as a result passion, sex and romance plummet.

During this time people tend to:

- 1) Become critical, defensive and disrespectful of each other
- 2) Say things they will later regret.
- 3) Not consider their partner's point of view and not compromise.
- 4) Have elevated heart rates during arguments.
- 5) Feel as though their partners are enemies instead of allies.
- 6) Often feel they don't like or respect their partners anymore.
- 7) Eventually both partners report feeling unappreciated, neglected and lonely.

Not surprisingly, 30% of all domestic violence begins during pregnancy. Statistics show that 37% of obstetric patients experience domestic violence from their partners.

Fortunately, we have been able to identify 6 factors that are the most helpful in maintaining marital satisfaction and happiness. These factors have been shown to reduce the occurrence of divorce by 50%, reduce the rate of postpartum depression by 40%, and keep hostility to a minimum. The negative effect the fighting has on the baby is reversed. The babies show more intense positive emotions and fewer negative emotions. They also learned language earlier and later in life show an improved ability to behave appropriately in times of strong emotion.

It is important to realize that it is the situation that is causing the problems, not your partner.

Gottman's 6 factors for maintaining marital satisfaction and happiness are:

- 1) Realizing that both partners are experiencing new and different stressors  
Both are tired and feeling overworked To put it simply, everyone is exhausted , feeling more responsibility, experiencing a huge change in their identity and on a huge learning curve.
- 2) Delight in your baby. Love, hold, play (and smell) your baby together and separately.
- 3) Cool down your conflicts! Keep fights respectful and constructive. Take responsibility for your part and don't be defensive. Listen to your partner's point of view and acknowledge what you hear not just repeat your own point of view. Be open to your partners influence. Conflict that is managed well leads to deeper compassion and closeness. Be particularly careful of what Gottman calls the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which he has found are the highest predictors of divorce. They are
  - A) Criticism: It's a way of complaining globally that attacks the partner personally by pointing out his or her defects, including words like lazy or "you never".
  - B) Defensiveness: usually starts because the person is feeling attacked. Includes behaviors like attacking back, proclaiming one's innocence, being righteously indignant, "playing the victim".
  - C) Contempt: is the strongest predictor of divorce and includes slinging criticism at your partner from a place of superiority. It destroys relationships and the partner's self esteem as well as your own integrity.
  - D) Stonewalling: 85% of stonewallers are men. This happens when we don't like what our partner is saying so we give no response at all. Often times for men it is due to being overstimulated, and it is an attempt to reduce incoming stimuli.
- 4) Soften your start-ups. Women are much more likely to begin a conversation with an angry tone. Conversations that begin with anger end with anger 96% of the time. Say what you feel. Describe the problem neutrally with no blame. Say what you need, not what you don't need.

- 5) Accept influence from your partner. Marriages where the husbands accept influence from their wives have a lower rate of divorce. Remember that two heads are better than one. Accepting each other's influence, especially in the area of each person's strength, makes the partnership stronger and higher functioning.
- 6) Calm down by self-soothing. Take breaks when necessary or mutually negotiate a time out. Go for a walk, do deep breathing exercises or whatever else works for you. Agree on a time to reconnect and finish the discussion after you both calm down.

One technique I feel is useful with all of these tools is to ask questions and be sure you understand your partner's point of view fully to your partner's satisfaction before stating your own point of view.

I know this is a huge topic, and although I have included a lot of information we have barely scratched the surface. The important thing to know is that couples are the most at risk for problems and the most at risk for divorce during the first 3 years after a baby is born. We now understand the process and what helps to help partners feel happy and fulfilled in their marriages again, as well as decreasing the serious impact the fighting and hostility has on the baby's development. Unfortunately most couples don't get help for an average of 6 years. Obviously, the longer couples wait to get help the more difficult the process and the lower the chance of success.

Please feel free to ask any questions or call me at a later time if you prefer to discuss your questions in private.